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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 002177

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/27/2015

TAGS: PHUM TU AA OSCE

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S INTRODUCTORY CALL ON ECUMENICAL PATRIARCH

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones, Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: During a cordial introductory call on December 20, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I outlined for the Ambassador the history of the Greek Orthodox Church in Turkey and underscored three major factors threatening it: the lack of a seminary for the training of priests; the lack of legal status (and consequent inability to own property); and the current inability to elect a non-Turkish national as successor to the Ecumenical Patriarch. The Ambassador reaffirmed the USG's determination to continue to press for movement on these critical issues. End Summary.

12. (C) Bartholomew warmly welcomed the Ambassador, offering his hopes for a fruitful US-Turkish bilateral relationship and for US efforts here and in the region. He also expressed thanks for longstanding U.S. support for the Greek Orthodox community in Turkey, as well as his appreciation for the recent official U.S. statement on Halki seminary. Ambassador thanked Bartholomew for receiving him and emphasized the importance he attached to calling upon him during his first visit to Istanbul. Religious freedom remains at the top of our agenda with Turkey, he said, and we continue to press the case that such freedom does not hurt Turkey but rather strengthens it.

13. (C) Bartholomew said the Patriarchate's future is related closely to Halki Seminary. It needs to be able to train priests for the community. He has pressed the government repeatedly without result. He stressed that the seminary does not need to be at the university level; a high school or vocational charter is sufficient. Such a charter was granted in 1951, but has since been disregarded by the authorities. The Patriarch observed that the President of Turkey's Higher Education Board has admitted that there are no legal obstacles to the school's reopening; what is missing is political will. He added that while the Armenian Patriarch apparently was amenable to a recent government proposal to resolve the larger theological school issue, the conditions were unacceptable to the Greek community.

14. (C) Turning to the decline of the Orthodox community in Turkey, which fell from 100,000 to 3,000 by the end of the 20th century as a result of poor Greek-Turkish relations, Bartholomew emphasized the importance of relaxing the requirement that the Patriarch be a Turkish citizen. He is already pushing on this issue. He had taken the decision last year to include non-Turkish citizens in the church's Holy Synod for the first time in the history of the Turkish Republic. It included representatives of all the Ecumenical Patriarch's jurisdictions (Chicago, Toronto, Italy, Crete, Thessaloniki, Deodecannus). While the local press had created some difficulties, the Government had not. Bartholomew added that he hopes to see a return to the system whereby a non-Turk can be elected Patriarch, with the ability to immediately take Turkish nationality/citizenship upon arrival in Turkey, as occurred in 1946 when Athenagoras, the Archbishop of Latin America, was elected Patriarch.

15. (C) Bartholomew also highlighted the Greek Orthodox Church's property. The Patriarchate was awaiting the new Foundation Law, which will soon be voted upon by the National Assembly. The law is not favorable to the Greek community and contains a clause that facilitates the expropriation of unused or little used property, e.g. facilities where religious ceremonies have not been celebrated for a certain period of time. Under already existing legislation, the GOT earlier had taken 18 churches, monasteries and an orphanage, none of which had been returned to the community.

16. (C) The Patriarch outlined his longstanding efforts to promote interfaith dialog with Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran and other denominations. He noted confidentially that he expected the Pope to visit Istanbul for the Feast of St. Andrew in 2006 and invited the Ambassador to attend accompanying events. He had hoped for the Pope to come to this year's feast, but GOT intervention had forced postponement. Bartholomew said that the Archbishop of Canterbury invited him to conclude the first phase of an Anglican-Orthodox dialog and that a second phase will open in the summer of 2006. He also reviewed his efforts to promote environmental awareness and conservation, and underscored the importance of having a properly trained clergy to continue

these dialogs.

17. (C) In response to the Ambassador's inquiry about security cooperation with the Turkish government, the Patriarch reviewed the attacks and demonstrations carried out by nationalists against the Patriarchate in recent years. Bartholomew said that the current government provides good security support, in contrast to the early 1990s, when demonstrators were allowed to penetrate within the Patriarchal compound. He has had access to key ministers, including Prime Minister Erdogan and Interior Minister Aksu. Meetings with them and others have sometimes produced promises of action on Patriarchate issues, but nothing results. Bartholomew expressed frustration with continued nationalist attacks on his institution, arguing that in addition to pursuing EU accession and associated reforms, there is a need to change the mentality of segments of the Turkish population.

JONES